

Interviewee: Sr. Mary Anne Azanza
Interviewer: Colleen M. Quinn
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Abstract: Sister Mary Ann Azanza was born on October 12, 1959 in New York City. Shortly thereafter, her family moved to the Philippines where both her parents grew up. She completed her schooling in the Philippines and upon graduation moved to the United States. Two years later, she became a Religious of the Assumption, a path she never thought she would travel down. She returned to the Philippines where she entered religious life. In 1996, she was asked to join the Worcester community to work with the immigrant and poor community. She began working with St. Peter's Church almost immediately due to its location in the middle of a diverse neighborhood with many immigrant communities. Now she holds the position of Provincial Superior of the Assumption Sisters in the United States. She discusses the challenges she faced growing up in the Philippines, her interesting path to being a religious sister, her extensive work with St. Peter's Church, and her hope for the future of Worcester.

CQ: (___???) permission to record their oral history on tape today.

MA: Yes, you have my permission.

CQ: We are completing a city wide oral history of the lives of Worcester women aiming to collect stories about a broad range of experiences based on the goals of the 1850 National Women's Rights Convention in Worcester. We are focusing on the area of women's education, health, work, politics, and community involvement. Thank you for help with this important project.

MA: You're welcome.

CQ: First question, what is your full maiden name?

MA: I'm Sister Mary Ann Azanza.

CQ: Where and when were you born?

MA: I was born on October 12, 1959 in New York City.

CQ: What culture/ ethnicities do you identify with?

MA: My parents are Filipino and my grandparents were Spanish so I'm of those ethnicities.

CQ: Can you tell me a little about your parents such as their schooling or work background?

MA: Well, my father came from—well both my parents were born in the Philippines and were raised in the Philippines and right after the Second World War when the Philippines was granted its independence by the United States. My father was sent by the Philippine National Bank to head its office in New York and so my family moved to New York in 1947 and stayed there until 1962. My mother was a housewife and while my family was living there, three of us were born there so that is how I happened to be born in New York, but my father was recalled to the Philippines when I was two years old so I was born in New York but I was raised in the Philippines and my father continued his work as a banker in the Philippines and my mother continued her work as a housewife and as a mother raising five of us. So that's—that's a little bit about them.

CQ: Since you were not born in Worcester, when did you arrive here?

MA: Well, [laughs] I, I finished all my schooling in the Philippines and two years after I graduated from college I entered religious life and I became a Religious of the Assumption which is an International Catholic Congregation. We are in 34 different countries and one of the countries we're in is the United States and I was asked in 1996 to come and join the community here in Worcester as a missionary with the purpose of beginning some apostolic work with the immigrant community in Worcester and with the poor and with the local church. Even if our sisters had always been at Assumption College from the time they came to Worcester, they wanted one of us to work outside of the college and to engage Assumption College students in the inner city of Worcester. So I came in '96 and I started working at St. Peter's almost immediately because of its location downtown in the middle of a very ethnically diverse neighborhood with many immigrant communities, across the street from Clark University and connected to Assumption College so we started different programs there to engage the students and to be at the service of the immigrant community down there so I've been there ever since '96—I've been here ever since '96.

CQ: [Laughs] Do you have any other family members that live in the area or like whereabouts do they live?

MA: No, my, my, my closest rela—you know close relative is my brother in California and I have sister who lives in Germany and I have my two other brothers in the Philippines and my mother in the Philippines so there's nobody close, really.

CQ: Aww...

MA: Yeah...

CQ: What changes have you noticed that occurred like over time in Worcester?

MA: Oh well I've been here 13 years, what changes have I noticed? [Laughs] Not much I

think [laughs] in, in 13 years. I think that in terms of see my work has mostly been immigrants. There have been more and more immigrants coming from Central American countries, a diversity of countries. I think the African community has grown quite a bit. At St. Peter's we have -- it's the seat of African ministry in the dioceses of Worcester and, and that's seen a great growth in the time that I've been here. A couple of years ago, we had a Sister here from Rwanda who was studying at Assumption College and she was more involved with the African community and I've really seen how it's grown over the years so I think there's been a, an increase in the immigrant community in Worcester over the 13 years that I've been here.

CQ: Do, does this city still face challenges or like do you notice any challenges it faces?

MA: Well, obviously the economic crisis now has affected everybody and impacted everybody. I think it's impacting the college in terms of you know, the capacity of students to continue studying at a private school. I know many people in the Main South neighborhood where I work that have lost their jobs or have lost their homes. I think there's a, a real effort to keep people employed but it's just getting harder and harder and social services are being impacted at St. Peter's Church. We normally would serve let's say 250 families at Thanksgiving and Christmas with packages to help them out and last Christmas and Thanksgiving, that number rose to 480 so that's almost double the number of people that are coming to us for food assistance or you know, heating bills or rent or medical bills so clearly life is getting harder these days.

CQ: If theres something in the city you would change what would it be?

MA: If there's something in the city I would change I think I, I'd like to see an improvement in the public school system in the quality of our educational offerings, I'd like to see better housing for people, better healthcare, I mean [laughs] it's all a laundry list. It's a lot to put on the city but you know I, I wish those problems could be addressed and you know, food. There, there's hunger in the city, it, it's terrible to say it but you know there's, there's a lot of -- there are a lot of families that are hurting even with the basic issue of food. My work has been more with youth and immigrant people but those are major issues, housing, health, education, also in terms of, of human rights for immigrants I wish that could be improved through immigration reform. So...

CQ: What distinct characteristics make Worcester the place it is?

MA: Well, [laughs] I think that for being the second largest city in New-in New England, no, in, in Massachusetts. I think the second largest city in New England is Providence but for being a city with that distinction, I think Worcester still has a pretty small town feel and I like that about Worcester. It's green, it's not, you know, a concrete jungle. There's still a sense of community that you feel, people know each other so there's that small, that small townness about it even if it is the second largest city in, in Massachusetts. I like, I like the natural beauty of it, the, the trees you know, the Quinsig lake, so, so the natural beauty, the, the sense of community, the, the, you know, that sort of thing I like very much about Worcester.

CQ: What do you think women's experiences in Worcester have generally been?

MA: I think, I think that Massachusetts is a fairly progressive state, probably too progressive for other people so I think there's been some- I, I, I think maybe relatively speaking, women here have many more opportunities than in other places. They have opportunities of education and good jobs. I would say that the immigrant community has a long ways to go in terms of having women of Hispanic background or African background break out of the cultural norms of their countries of origin and feeling that they can be women who have the same opportunities as American women, so yeah, I think there's still a little, you know, room for improvement but I think that women in Worcester, I mean, our, our mayor's a woman, there are people, women, in positions of authority in the government and education sector and all. I think that we're not so badly off in terms of women's rights in, in Worcester. But I think the Hispanic women-I think we have to help the immigrant communities also kind of break out of those cultural norms that sometimes keep them in, in an inferior position in the family or in the workplace.

CQ: Yeah.

MA: Yeah.

CQ: Alright, Now we're just kinda gonna move to a little bit of like your previous education like where did you attend schools like?

MA: Well my-I went to Catholic school all my life. I, I studied in the Philippines so my, my grade school was done at the Maryknoll Sisters School, at the Maryknoll Grade School and then I transferred to Assumption for high school and I went to Assumption College in Manila for my undergrad. degree and then I went to the Jesuit University in Manila for my Master's degree in Theology.

CQ: Did you have any challenges in your education?

MA: Yes. [Laughs] And I, I you know, I went to school at a time in my country when we were under a dictatorship. We were under the dictatorship of President Ferdinand Marcos at the time and I was studying at the Assumption High School and the Assumption College in Manila and the Assumption sisters were being very true to the charism of our foundress which was that our education and our faith had social consequences, that we couldn't be living in a situation of great poverty and of great injustice without somehow doing something with our education to make that better and, and our faith also demanded that we do something to change the situation of the poor and of the unjust political system we were under, so I got very involved in social justice activities and when I was in my senior year in college, I got arrested by the military and I was put under military arrest for four months and I had to stop my schooling, clearly, [laughs] since I was under arrest and, and then afterwards when I was released, I had one more semester to go in college and I graduated, but my family requested that I leave the country for a while because they

never knew when I left the house in the morning if I'd come back alive in the evening you know, with the fear that I'd just be picked up by the military again. So I left for the United States and I worked here in San Francisco for a year but it was while I was in San Francisco that I felt, you know, I had been feeling the attraction to religious life for some time but I never thought I could possibly be a nun, that I wasn't holy enough, I wasn't good enough, I wasn't-I just wasn't made out to be a nun. I, you know, I wanted to have a family and I wanted to raise kids and, and I had a boyfriend at the time and all so I just didn't pay any attention to it but it was while I was away from home and, and after the experience of the arrest that I began to evaluate what really was important to me and what were the deepest desires that I had, really, and I decided to, to face up to it and say, well I think God is calling me to be a Sister whether I feel it-or feel that it's-that I'm appropriate for it or not and so I, I lived with the Sisters in the United States for a couple of months just to observe their life and when I felt you know, it was more and more confirming my call to religious life. I returned to the Philippines and I, I entered there but I guess the greatest challenge to my education was, was trying to put my education to work and to, to suffer, suffer in quotation marks, the consequences of, of that commitment to social responsibility so that was it.

CQ: What support networks and mentoring have been important to you throughout your life?

MA: Well, my parents, my school, the Sisters, the Jesuit priests I went to study with afterwards, my religious community, have all been my support networks and since I've come to Worcester, the Parish of St Peter's has been a great support to me too.

CQ: Now we're just kinda gonna move on to the work background. And, what kind of jobs have you had previous in life?

MA: Well my first job was really as a secretary. This is when I was- you know when I left the Philippines and was just kind of figuring out my life so I was, I was as sec-my first job was as a secretary in an investment firm. [Laughs] The furthest thing from what I am doing now and, and, then I, I went to live with the Sisters as I said in Philadelphia. I was working at the refugee resettlement office of the Archdiocese in Philadelphia then I returned to Manila and I, in the Philippines, I started teaching and I was a high school teacher for a couple of years. I taught English and history and religion and then I became a principal of a high school, one of our high schools in the Philippines and then I was sent here in '96 and I became a pastoral minister at St. Peter's Church and I started the mentoring program and I started the English as a Second Language program and I was responsible for the Catechetical Program, the CCD program at St. Peter's. Then with the congregation we began the Lay Volunteer program, the Associate Missionaries of the Assumption. I was-I am continuing to be the co-director of the program and three years ago, I was named Provincial Superior of the Assumption Sisters in the United States so I am the Superior of, of the Sisters in the United States!

MA: [laughs]

CQ: [laughs] Wow.

MA: So that's kinda my work.

CQ: What has all this work meant to you?

MA: My life! [laughs] It's my life. I love it. I love the work with the children at St. Peter's and I love the work with the college students that I do. I think it's, I think it's beautiful to see how lives can be changed by an experience on the children's part of someone taking an interest in them and investing in them and I can see the change that happens in the college students by the experience of, of relationships with the kids so that's been a beautiful part of, of my life. I don't think of it as a job, I think of it as really a life. I think it's transforming people. I, I think of the students we have in English as a Second Language courses you know, how, how they're able to integrate themselves better in society because of the language skills they develop and the sense of community that's built up in the class so they don't feel so alone in a new setting, in a new culture. I love the work with the Lay Volunteers and I love the work with the sisters. I, I love the sisters and I try to see how we can, you know, not only build community where each one feels loved and accepted but can really commit ourselves to transforming unjust structures that we see or, or structures and, and situations that need support, change.

CQ: When you were growing up, what were primary responsibilities in terms of like housework?

MA: I was the youngest in my family so my job was to do what my older brothers and sisters said. [laughs].

CQ: [Laughs]

MA: So I was kind of like the gofer in the house. My father died when I was 11 and so, as I was growing up as a teenager, I, you know, I helped my mother out quite a bit because my dad wasn't around anymore so really, you know, that that was kind of my role in the family too, I wasn't the more responsible one for decisions because my older brothers and sisters were more responsible for that, I was, I was more of a supportive role and a support to my mom after my dad died.

CQ: How have you balanced different priorities, responsibilities, and roles, and interests in your life like throughout the years?

MA: With much difficulty. [laughs]

CQ: Yeah.

MA: You know it, it's kind of hard to, to balance work, community life which I have a responsibility to as a member of a religious community but it's, it's been, it's, it's, it's been exciting, it's been a challenge, it's been a-yeah its been a challenge to try and keep

myself healthy, mentally, physically, spiritually, but it's, it's made my life I think full because of so many different experiences.

CQ: Alright, so now we're gonna kinda move on to politics and community involvement. Do you consider yourself active politically?

MA: Active politically? Well I vote. [laughs] I, I yes, I am active politically. I do take an interest in what's happening. I do sign letters to my congressmen or to, or to my senator. I, I am involved in different Catholic organizations that try to bring Catholic social teaching to social issues. I am a member of NETWORK which is a Catholic, of a Catholic, what's it called, I, I'm at a loss of words but, but we're present at the United Nations, we're present at the Capitol trying to lobby for Catholic issues, so yeah I am politically involved.

CQ: Do you have any like hobbies or regular leisure activities you enjoy?

MA: I play the guitar. [laughs]

CQ: In all the spare time, which is not much!

MA: In all the spare time? Yeah, I like music. I, I, I play the guitar. I love to drive, it relaxes me and you know, go see places. I don't get that much time to do it but I, I like to read. So music and reading I think are, are my greatest hobbies. I don't like to cook too much.

KS: [Laughs]

CQ: Any specific kinds of music or just?

MA: I guess the more mellow kinds of music. [Laughs]

MA: Yeah.

CQ: How long have you been playing guitar for?

MA: Oh, I started when I was in the fifth grade so...

CQ: So a long time.

MA: and, and we, we, we sing a lot as, as sisters. We sing the liturgy of the hour so I get to, I get to use my, my guitar quite a bit.

CQ: So I know like St. Peter's is a community thing but are there any others that you kind of do now or did when you were younger?

KS: Such as service type things.

MA: Service type things? Oh yeah I, I did. When I was in high school, I, I used to go on weekends to, you know, the sisters had organized all these kinds of service things and so I used to go to a, to a leper colony that we have outside of Manila that we worked with the children of the lepers. I also used to go to a slum area. We used to give leadership formation and just activities for the youth in the slum areas. In college, I used to do more of the same. We used to go on spring break emersions to fisherman's communities or farming communities so I, I did a lot. And then I got a little more politically involved. We used to visit the political detainees in the, in the detention camps. As I said, it was a time of, of a dictator so a lot of people were picked up for their political activism not so much for crimes but, but for that so yeah.

CQ: So now we're kinda gonna move on to health. Have any health issues impacted your life?

MA: Thank God I've been in pretty good health all my life. I've had a couple of accidents along the way but nothing really that disabled me or anything. But I have a medical condition now that I didn't know I had. I discovered two years ago when I had a tightening in my chest and I went through all of these tests in the hospital and it turns out, see when I was in the Philippines, I, I as a sister I was assigned for seven years to a community that was besides a, a steel-smelting plant and we fought hard against the pollution that this was giving to our community and I found out three years ago that my lungs have been impacted by the seven years of living beside it and I have some, some stuff in there that I just can't get rid of and I have to do lung exercises now to strengthen my lungs because there's been dust from the steel-smelting process that's lodged in my lungs so.

CQ: That's not good.

MA: No. [Laughs].

CQ: What are your experiences in like accessing quality and affordable healthcare?

MA: Well fortunately our, our community provides us with a good HMO, good HMO coverage. We're covered by Fallon and that's been-I haven't had any difficulty because we're with Fallon.

CQ: Alright, well now this is kinda just a few questions to conclude the interview. How do you feel about the choices you've made in your life and do you have any regrets?

MA: I'm so glad I made the choices that I did. I, I struggled over making them you know, but I, I am just so happy that I am a Religious of the Assumption, that I've become a sister with this congregation. The congregation has been really, really good to me and has given me so many beautiful experiences of life. Difficult things to say yes to, it wasn't easy to say yes to come to this country and be away from all that I love and know in the Philippines but you know, it wasn't easy to say yes to being Provincial Superior of this

congregation in the United States but I have drawn so much life and beautiful experiences that I, I really am just grateful. And I, I think that you know when we make our vows as religious, we make a vow of obedience and often it wasn't very clear to me where saying yes to something would bring me but trusting in the will of God, and the love of God, and in the wisdom of my superiors, I said yes and really I couldn't have, have, have planned my life any better. I'm just grateful to be here and having had the experiences that I have had and continue to have.

CQ: Based on your life experience, would you- what advice would you give to women today and in future generations?

MA: I would, I would, I would encourage women to listen to their hearts and what their greatest desires are even if it isn't what is the most popular or conventional but to go for really what they feel called to be and do and just go for it and let it take them where it will. You know I think I've made-I've made in my life some unconventional choices, things that made my mother's heart break [laughs] but you know, you have to be true to yourself and, and, and I think that there are so many more opportunities now available to women that, that women can, can just go for what they feel called to be and do. And they'll find the support they need in other women I think to go for it. That's, that's my advice. Listen to your heart really deeply, really deeply and even if it's a, a totally crazy idea, to go for it.

CQ: Do you feel you have a legacy?

MA: I'm too young. [laughs]

CQ: [laughs]

MA: I think I'm, I'm, I haven't lived enough to, to think in, in legacy terms yet I think, so [laughs].

CQ: Now that we are working to tell a fuller story of the past of women that has been recorded in the past, what she we be sure to include? Anything specific you can think of?

MA: What, what should we include in, in..?

CQ: Like in since they're like gonna put this online they're trying to just come up with like women's stuff in the past. Are there any events or any things you think should be included?

MA: Any important event?

CQ: Any important events that sticks out in your mind?

MA: In Worcester? Or anywhere?

CQ: I think either.

MA: You know, I, I think that the story of women is written and sometimes you know, you've got Hillary Clinton running for president but really the, the story of women is written everyday in many unsung and unnoticed ways and I think they're just as important as the stories of the women who make it to the headlines and I, I think that you know those women's stories should be heard too. The Philippines had its first woman president in 1986. She was the widow of-Cory [Corazon] Aquino- was the widow of Ninoy [Benigno] Aquino who was shot, who was assassinated and, you know, everybody said, well you should be [tape cuts off end of last question].